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Directing a short animation and becoming a director with

Milinda
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Abstract

This research explores from the author’s perspective the creative process of a beginner animation director learning how to make a movie, how to find inspiration and work with feedback and how to approach a story to communicate a message, and how to build and manage a creative team. It also covers various topics relevant to 3D animation filmmaking, including learning technical aspects of Blender 3D software, builds of visuals from Brazil and exploring creative visual solutions as a director.

Keywords: animation director, creative process, movie-making, team management, 3D animation, Blender 3D, Brazilian visuals
1.0 Introduction

For a long time, I did not understand myself as an artist. I considered myself an artistic professional. I had a broad range of skills in developing visuals, and I was hired and paid for using them to bring solutions to projects. This changed during this thesis.

In this thesis, I shared my creative journey and process in becoming a director, not only in the sense of knowing how to make decisions for a movie and figuring out how to communicate ideas to the audience but to a team of other artists and manage them.

Milinda is a project based on memories from my family and me, however, we have close to no photographs from those moments. I talk about the research and process to construct the visual of memories and bring to the story the many aspects and reflections present in the plot, such as the importance of education for women and racism.

I studied the filmography of the directors Anna Muylaert and Petra Costa to be inspired by their workflow and find my process when working with stories involving social issues and connecting them to the film plot.

Being a movie about a Brazilian, in this thesis, I investigate the narrative impact of having its aesthetics represented on the screen and share the directing process of constructing it with a team of Brazilian artists. It is interesting to notice how much emotional connection it can generate in the target audience and how much information can be conveyed in that way.

I shared how it was developing each stage of this movie: research, script, storyboard, polishing the story, finding creative narrative solutions, concept and design, 3D modelling, rigging, animation, sound design and working with an actress for an original voice. From the moments it worked to how I solved when it initially did not and what I learned from the journey.

This thesis is written from my artistic perspective, and the objective was to explain my artistic decisions and choices in order to offer guidance to other beginner directors that feel lost and unsure if they can and how to achieve their visions.

The research covers various topics, including technical aspects of 3D software, building of visual references from other artists and finding creative solutions as a director.
2.0 Background, Methods and Technique

2.1 Artistic path and previous work

During a class in my bachelor's in animation about film auteurs, a tutor stated that to make a movie, you must have something to say. I was very young, not sure if even in my 20s, and that thought resonated with me deeply.

I started studying animation with the perspective of becoming a character animator. My passion for storytelling and films have always been with me, but coming from Brazil, a country with a small cinema industry and struggling animation scene, becoming a professional in the area felt like a hard accomplishment in itself.

Becoming a director was not even on my horizon. Developing as an artist brought the understanding of what I wanted to discuss. And I went back to Milinda.

Milinda is how my great-grandmother was called by our family. She was a farm worker in the 1930's in Brazil. She was not allowed to study by her father, because female's daughter did not need to learn how to read and my memory of her is mostly a hypochondriac bitter woman. However, there was a story she would tell sometimes, bit by bit and my cousins and I would puzzle it together. When young she fell in love with a handsome young man called Gabiel. Her father did not approve the relationship, but Gabiel would throw candies with notes wrapped in them through the windows of the farm where she cleaned. One day he sent a letter. Her father read it to her. He said Gabiel wrote to let her know he was already married to someone else. That was a lie. Gabiel was proposing her. But he was a black man and that was unacceptable for her father.

This story that has been with me for a very long time. From my great-grandmother’s narrations to my desire to make it into a movie there is over a decade of wonderings. At first, I could not figure out how to approach the story, to convey the frustrations and disappointments so important to the narrative to visual language.

In my bachelor's thesis movie, I felt unable to approach it. I archived the idea for a long time. Sometimes after work, I would try to start a script. Never successfully. By then I have made for my undergraduate course in animation a 2D short animation, called Dioniso, and then dedicated my next professional years to work with Motion Graphics for advertisement and instructional videos while I studied 3D character animation. Eventually, I shifted to working as a 3D Character animator for TV series and advertisements.

During that first short movie production, I felt very lost in the process. By that time I was already invested in studying and developing my abilities with 3D, but if I felt lost in the 2D pipeline, that making a 3D film seemed impossible. I often would feel confused about what
should be done and would notice while trying to start a scene I was missing a lot of other
details that should be adjusted and prepared before I started animating. There was a prop
missing, there was no definition for the thickness of the clean-up line, where was the
background proportions to adjust and I was doing all this decisions as they started conflicting
and becoming an issue in the production. There were many organization stages lacking and I
could not figure how to implement them. The thought of trying to delegate task and scenes to
another person would feel overwhelming. It seemed harder then do it myself due to the series
of questions the animator would make and I had no answers. Explaining all the ideas and
decisions I had in my mind felt chaotic. Because of it, with the exception of a few scenes that
I managed to organize and find someone that was willing to deal with my lack of organization,
I basically everything by myself.

A couple of years ago, once I learned about Re:Anima, the only expectation I had was
to be able to grow and become capable of telling this story. Even though I still did not dominate
the entire pipeline of a 3D production this time I wanted to make an short film in the technique
to learn how to better navigate it. From the technical aspect, to make Milinda a lot of learning
and development would be necessary, as I decided to use Blender from the Blender
Foundation as the 3D software in the movie. Although it was not my first time working with the
software, I stopped using Blender since my bachelors, before the major updates the new
versions implemented in the recent version.

In the past few years, my experience with 3D was animation-focused and using Maya
from Autodesk. I did not know how to 3D model, rig, make textures, light, render and so many
other small technicalities, which meant I would need to relearn Blender and study a lot from
the technical aspect.

And that was the starting goal of this artistic journey. The process involved in this two
years was not only learning and developing artistic and technical skills myself, but becoming
a director.

2.2 Understanding myself as a director

As it was said before, from my previous movie Dioniso, I learned organization was
crucial and that would involve a lot decision making in the earlier stages of the film so during
the production they were implemented smoothly. But I was unsure of how I should make those
decisions towards the direction I was intending. I was feeling confused and decided to
investigate directors I admire and that have stories in a way similar to mine.

One of the first research questions at the beginning of this project that was very
important for my artistic growth was regarding how to approach the story. It has always been
a struggle to write a script about my great-grandmother's experience. There were so many
aspects and reflections in the story. The importance of women education and emancipation, racism, European immigration, female subservice, betrayal and all the ways they connect to each other and the power dynamics from our society this story reveals.

Considering so many possibilities and feeling lost, I decided to study the directors I admire and appreciate their stories and their portrayals of social issues connected to the film plot.

I studied the filmography of Anna Muylaert and Petra Costa. I researched their creative process, interviews they have given about their movies and how it they constructed their scripts and matured the story over the years.

The choice was made based on the impact the films made by them had on me. Both directors have films that talk about Brazilian society and explicit our social behaviour that are a reflection of bigger social issues we have. It was the core idea that I wanted to exercise and approach with my own movie and studying their creative process in an attempt to learn and understand how can I be inspired and apply that in my own project was insightful on many ways for my development.

Cinema by Anna Muylaert: when fiction meets the real world. In this session I will explore Anna Muylaert creative process and reflect on how much of those methods inspired me to adapt for my own production.

Anna Muylaert is a Brazilian director and screenwriter born in São Paulo. Often, when asked about her stories and inspirations she replies that her movies are a sort of portrait of the middle class in Brazil, herself being born in this context. (Muylaert, 2016)

The first contact I had with Anna Muylaert was the movie *The Second Mother*, directed by her on 2015.

Figure 1. Frame from *The Second Mother*, directed by Anna Muylaert in 2015
In that movie, Val works as a nanny and maid in the same family for more than a decade in a situation once very common in Brazil, where this type of professional would live in the family’s house, in a small room and usually be paid very little. She is from Recife, but since she started to work for this family she lives with them in São Paulo, a city on the other side of the country. Now, over 10 years later, her daughter, Jessica, is applying for a university in São Paulo and is coming to live with her and prepare for the exams.

I was impressed by the movie. The storytelling, the female and the mother figure representation, the classism and social conflict explored by the story, the subtle acting and the rich subtext in the dialogues. The biggest impact the story had on me was the approach of the patronal work relationship the middle class have with other social classes in Brazil. I have lived that dynamic in real life. Sometimes I have been Val and many other times I have been perceived as a higher hierarchy by other Vals in other context my life. The representation of this uncomfortable power dynamic colonialism left in our culture ignited discussions across the country. (Maia, 2015).

It also it portrays the historical change Brazil had on the last decade, specially the impacts the law from 2013 that granted work right to maids and the investments in social well being the country was making at the time and the changes at caused in the social classes. (2015)

I understood it was necessary to explicitly tell the social discussion Milinda is immersed in. They can be communicated throw visual language and story choices. It is necessary to trust a little bit more that the public will have the sensibility to understand the director's intentions and reminded myself of that later, when I was working on polishing the script.

Going back to Anna Muylaert’s filmography, it became clear the presence of the world and society as part of the characters' lives and as a relevant part of the conflict. Muylaert explains that she is more interested in this subtle daily relationships, often times ironic and unexpected from our human nature. (Maia, 2015)

This storytelling approach has been there from the beginning. Her first movie, Durval Discos (2002), is a story about a man in his 50's living with his mom and owner of a vinyl store. The world is presented as a clue of his inert personality: music technology is evolving to CD and he refuses to sell it in his store. It also makes it more present in the main conflict, which involves the kidnapping of a child, a crime very present in the Brazilian media during the 2000s.

The use of the background and historical context as a narrative tool was also something that could be relevant for my movie. It could help me not needing so many characters, showing timeline difference and still expressing their personality in a shorter movie.

In Smoke gets in your eyes (2009), we have kind of a girl next door story, but not before presenting the social pressure and expectation for women to get married. That are not many
expository dialogues about this in the movie, it is mostly conveyed with the acting. So much happy the female character is around the romantic interest, how much of her life is dedicated to that. That is a cultural context even stronger for when Milinda was younger and I decided it would also be important to explore that in my script.

*Chamada a cobrar* (2012), which translates to something like Collect call, is about a kind of crime very common in Brazil. You receive a call from incarcerated people pretending to have kidnapped someone from your family and asking for money for the rescue. And it is still there in her most recent fictional film, *Don't call me son* (2016), which was inspired by a famous real crime in Brazil. It tells the story of Pierre, a teenager going through an identity crisis, trying to understand who he is, when he is surprised by the discovery that he was kidnapped as a baby in the hospital. He now has to live in a new family and is faced with new expectations about who they expect him to be and how they don't want him to behave.

Even though in the last two I could not directly find a useful approach for my movie, I could notice the creative choices the director made that lead me to those conclusions.

Beyond her movies I watched many interviews for Muylaert about her creative process. In interview with Espaço Público Anna says as a director she likes to allow the actor to improvise and contribute to the construction of the character as much as possible. She wants them to understand the story, the nuances, the feelings and then explores how they think it should be done. (2016)

In an interview to Metrópolis (2015) she says that as a screenwriter she knows the intention of each scene and the emotional goal of it, so she lets the actors know it and expect them to build on it. That perhaps was the most insightful advice I learned from her.

As I will discuss further in the chapters dedicated to the production phase, I was confident to allow the artists that were working with me to make suggestions and explore on the solutions for the story. Having the materials organized and the story and intentions so clear to myself opened the space for creative collaboration. I had my own solutions and if we debating our ideas did not fit the story better we could go back to the original plan, but often times that was not the case and allowing this interventions from the artistic team that worked with me truly made the movie better then what I could have achieved alone.

Another very curious part of her process is something she calls Demofilm. As Muylaert defines in an interview for the TV show *Persona* (2020):

Demofilm is a crazy idea of record the whole film in two days. One plane for each scene, in the right order... Then, the actors alternate the other roles and you have a sort of movie draft, full of problems, but anyway... Sometimes the airport is your toilet and it is ok. It's about the dare to do it all at once. [Translated by Author]
In that way, she and the actors get to explore the story and possible solutions for it. For me, it sounds like the storyboard and animatic stage of animation films. As she, I exercised this use of the animatic as a tool to receive feedback and polish the narrative. I had around 14 version of the animatic with significant changes. In the first versions I was trying to convey the story, find better framing, pace, testing if people could understand the plot, their emotional reactions and if there was anything that felt repetitive. As part of the master, I had the opportunity to have workshops and masterclasses with the directors Marjut Rimminen, José Miguel Ribeiro and Piotr Dumala, followed by one-on-one feedback sessions. In those I not only got insights for the movie but also got really good advices for what should I keep in mind while working in this movie. I will talk more about the core lessons I learned with them in the script development.

I also would discuss them with my supervisor Tuula Leinonen and advisor Virgilio Vasconcelos, that would push me to find more creative solutions and explore animation solutions for the story. Each version would take a lot of self reflection and decisions in the search for a shorter and clear story.

Beyond methodology, when Anna talks about how she developed her movies in interview to Espaço Público. She wonders what the story implies considering who that character is and what context they live in or what else in the world is related to the main theme of the conflict. (2016)

With the character Jéssica from The Second Mother (2015), for instance, she explains that once she decides Jéssica goal would be to study in an elite university in São Paulo, she started to think about what would that mean regarding the personality of the character. Jéssica understands herself as an equal and would not comply with social hierarchy rules. It is also curious that Anna was working on that story for almost 20 years. (Muylaert, 2016) The first version of the script had fantasy and magical aspects that she considered a bigger challenge than her capabilities at the time.

I could directly relate to that. As I mentioned before, it has been a few years since I was trying to find a way to tell my great-grandmother’s story. And thinking about the historical context and approach the personas involved in the story as characters instead of family members made me question the plot and directions in a more rational way. Thought about the personality and motivations and feeling of Young Milinda and how did her Father perceived the situation and how would Old Milinda feel telling this made find a way to the explore different versions and approaches for the script.

Also having this reassurance that some stories take a while to be shaped. It does not mean it is not possible to tell them, it just will take more work to untie the narrative.

In summary, studying Muylaert filmography it was possible to conclude she welcomes personhood in her stories. She allows the actors to bring personal experiences, understanding
and feelings into the building of the character. That naturally involves a social context and it surrounds the story with precious subtleties.

It brings humanity into her movies and a connection with the audience. For many reasons I see myself in Jéssica, I see my family in Val, I grew with friends raised by a Val and I had my life changed by the unprecedented opportunities Brazil was creating at that time. While I watch her films I feel like I have been there and in a way, I lived that story, I can make it personal even though it is about someone else (or pure fiction). With Anna Muylaert, I learned the power of personality in storytelling as a possibility to trigger reflections and leave the story with the audience for a long time and many methods I adapted and implemented in my own directing style while producing Milinda.

**Cinema by Petra Costa: the documentary of her own life.** I watched two movies from Petra. *The Edge of Democracy* (2019) and *Elena* (2012). The first movie I watched from Petra Costa was *The Edge of Democracy*. It was an Oscar Nominee and I did not know much about it beyond the fact that it was a documentary about the Brazilian historical coup that started in 2013. But the reason why I was interested in her creative process was the fact that *The Edge of Democracy* is also a documentary about Petra Costa’s family.

![Figure 2. Frame from Elena, directed by Petra Costa in 2012.](image)

I was very much surprised by how much her own family and story were involved in the situation. The script was built in a way that it felt like a story that only she could tell. As she narrates in the movie, her grandfather was part of one of the companies involved in the corruption scheme the movie discuss. (Costa, 2019) On the other hand, her parents were part of the left-wing party and revolution against the military coup Brazil suffered from 1964 to 1985.
Petra uses a lot of archive images. And she has access to some impressive footages either from her family archive or that she captured during the production. It is remarkable her access to the backstage of the politicians in the movie. The director explains in an interview to Maria Laura Neves at first she was ignored but as she started recording with other politicians in the congress eventually she got access to the president. (2019)

And most of the interviews I found with Petra were focused in the political aspect of her movie. So I decided to study her work from a more personal perspective.

Because of this very particular and personal way of documentary direction I was also interested in another film of her, *Elena* (2012).

I remember seeing the trailer years ago and being very interested in it. It was her first feature film. So mysterious, so interesting. She seemed to talk about searching for someone very missed and loved. But I never got to watch it and I eventually forgot about it.

During the research, I realised it was a movie from Petra. Elena is about Petra’s older sister. She was an actress and dreamed about being cast for feature movies and went to study Theater at a university in New York. (Costa, 2012) The story is about her life, her struggles with depression and about Petra and their mother dealing with it and with Elena’s suicide at a very young age.

Again, Petra narrates this documentary in a way that makes us understand that this is a unique narrative and she is telling it from her perspective, which makes it very special. It conveys a sense of this story could only be told this way and by her. The documentary treated the images in a way we sometimes get confused if that is archive footage or current days material. They look so much alike: Petra, Elena and their mother. She plays with it. It makes us wonder if that is Petra or Elena, their mother or maybe older Elena.

The way she brings her personal relationships and connections into the story and she explores the specificities of those lives and contexts inspired me. I was resistant to have myself as a character in the movie, mostly because of the pipeline work it would mean. One more character rig in 3D means a lot more work and I was concerned about the schedule. But the impact the narrative could have with the presence of me as a child in the movie was more beneficial to the story and I decided to make it that way.

Petra also uses a lot of poetic visual language in her movie. Sometimes to escape a too personal topic she decided not to share. Many other times she uses it talk about the painful and hard subjects that surround the story and build meanings to the narrative.

Elena was so impactful for me, that I told the rest of the class we should watch it together because I felt like it would be a good reference for many of them. I explained the synopsis and why it felt like it could relate to the stories many of us were telling. And it was a movie night with almost half of the class, the female half.
This made me realise my references are not only about social issues but about womanhood. And made me wonder about how much can they be disconnected? Can we talk about being a woman or a woman's life without questioning society?

Petra taught me how being personal with in your movie can make it more universal and more relatable, while discuss important political and social questions.

With both directors I noticed how they welcome personal experiences and connections into the story. The specificities of those involved in the story, in the film production process, in the place the story happens. That intimacy naturally constructs a social context and it surrounds the story with subtleties. Which social class lived this? When did it happen and where? Do you know it from historical facts of is it a portray of personal experience? How much has it changed from nowadays reality? Those details bring humanity into the movie and allows the audience to recognise themselves in that context and to wonder about it. That is my goal with Milinda and as a director in general.

It was also very important to notice they are directors about women stories. First for how raw and unpolished they allowed their portraits of them be. Secondly, that talking about women often will mean discussing social issues, not always is necessary to be explicit about it, but is important to make the story acknowledge it and build the universe considering it. This study of them helped me to find guidance for how I could approach this story and what to have in mind while working on the project to communicate my intentions successfully.
2.3 Deciding for Blender

Blender is an open source 3D software from Blender Foundation. As I mentioned before, I studied with Blender during my Bachelor but since graduation I have focused on learning and working with a different software, called Maya from Autodesk. Beyond my interest to develop further my skills with in 3D, I decided to animate in the technique because it allows a lot of emotion and subtle facial expression, very present in this story.

I was being advised by different people to use Blender, but I felt more comfortable animating in Maya and therefore I had a decision to make between both of them. I had many conversations with my advisor Virgilio Vasconcelos, that is a specialist in the software and have even a book published about it and among a few other friends from my previous work.

Everyone advised me to use Blender. It has a very active community for resources, tutorials, the software can do all the stages of the production, it was free and the learning curve would not be big since I did know a bit about the software.

As I am an animator specialist and I did not know how to model, rig or any other technical skill required in either software the impact would mostly be learn how to animate in Blender.

Figure 3. Learning Blender.
So I watched a lot of tutorials and found my way in Blender to do some layout and pose studies based on a test scene I created as an initial study. I will talk more about this scene in the chapter about working with an actress.

I discovered some tools I was used in Maya do not exist in Blender and some other have different adaptations and in the end I could make a few poses of the character from my reference. For the scenario, I used the free models *Single Bed Free 3D model* and *Bed Room Free 3D model* from CG Trader. The rig is called *Rain* and it is from the Blender Studio (2020).

I also found many YouTube videos from *Just Tis Art* channel with objective tutorials that managed to refresh my memory about sculpting in Blender. For 3D modelling the channel *3DGreennhorn* was very efficient and for rendering, texturing and lighting the content from the YouTube channel *SouthernShotty* was very helpful.
For animation the "Animbot for Blender?!" video by the #LollypopMan channel (2020) showcases alternatives Blender addons for animators used to resources in Maya.

So I decided to follow all the guidance and recommendations I was receiving and use Blender. I will discuss more about some of the process and impacts this decisions lead to further in the artistic part, but overall I believe it was the right choice and lead to nice learnings and discovering.
3.0 Stages of directing

3.1 Understanding the story

During the research phase all necessary information for the project was gathered. As instructed in classes, a mind map was created to explore all possibilities and ideas for the short film. Relevant and crucial points were then filtered from the mind map, and a series of questions were developed to guide the research process.

This was the starting point of this research. As it is possible to see in the previous image, the topics discussed so far in this thesis were in the search for answers to questions raised during that reflection. The research questions covered a variety of topics, including
technical aspects of 3D software, visual references from other 3D animations, visual references from the time period the story takes place, and artistic approaches as a director. As "Milinda" is an animated documentary based on the real story of my great-grandmother and her first love, the questions also delved into the historical context and artistic interpretation of the facts.

The latter led to a series of interviews with many of my family members, which started while I was still in Brazil. The first interview was with Anna Chunti, my grandmother and Milinda's daughter. In addition to her, I also interviewed my cousins, my mother, and her siblings.

From these recordings, I later took notes and created a mind map with the information provided by them. Despite the divergent memories among family members, it was found that the core narrative remained the same, which allowed me as the director to select the variations that best contributed to making the film comprehensible and short. Visual memories of the family and the grandmother's house were also explored during the interviews, which helped to bring Brazilian aesthetics visually to the film.

The detailed mind maps about the interviews and characters can be found in the Appendix session.

3.2 Writing the script

I have been attempting to approach this project for a few years and felt very unsure of how to write this narrative as a screenplay. As I explained in the session about Anna Muylaert and Petra Costa, studying other directors I found some approaches to experiment with my story.

During the semester in Aalto University, as the research stage was mostly completed, I started writing the script. A few versions were made. The first of them was written as fiction. I felt like a relevant impact of the story was lost.

So I wrote a new version following an orientation from my supervisor Tuula Leinonen and advisor Virgilio Vasconcelos about not removing myself from the narrative. I also got some very good feedback in the directing workshop taught by Marjut Rimminen. She taught me how to think about the visual choices and movie aesthetic as a narrative layer and how much the father lie in the story was a very important point for the plot.

Through these creative exchanges I realized that having another screenwriter working with me could be very interesting for the advancement of the script. Being so close to the story and so emotionally involved was holding me back from giving up ideas and coming up with new perspectives.
Therefore, I invited a screenwriter I have been working with since my bachelors, Luiza Carvalho. Together we wrote many scripts during and after university and later worked in the same advertising company for several years, her as a screenwriter and me as an animator. As we worked together for many years, for me it is very comfortable and productive to work with Luiza. We are able to challenge each other ideas, to point out how we believe it is working or not and to destroy, construct and transform anything and everything done by the other.

An aspect that I realized during the process that was important is that we are from the same countryside region in Minas Gerais, my origin state in Brazil. She grew up in a neighbouring town to hometown. We share the same accent, many culture traditions and some childhood memories and experiences that are very similar, due to also having the same age. During our meetings for brainstorming and story discussion having the same background contributed for her being able to suggest approaches, character traits, choices and situations that were natural and enriched the film.

As a result of not one scene in the script fully written by me or by her. They have been written and rewritten by both of us multiple times, finding combinations of different solutions, which resulted in over 20 versions of the script. As I mentioned before, the same was happening with the animatic. Multiple versions is a recurrent part of my process. As Winder, Dowlatabadi, and Miller-Zarneke point in the book *Producing Animation*, the “consistent is the need to work and rework an idea over and over, poking holes into it and finding gaps. With every challenge come new solutions and ideas that can typically make a project better.” (2011). In every version we were challenging solutions. I was presenting the animatic for feedback from other people and coming back to work on the script and animatic.

From the workshops and feedback sessions during the master, a few were always present in my mind while evaluating the story. Tuula and Virgilio challenged me to explore more the visuals and find solutions that explored animation as a medium. José Miguel Ribeiro suggested me to experiment being less expository in my voice over and experiment letting space for interpretation. Piotr Dumala advised me to keep in mind what kind of emotion you wanted people to feel in the movie, especially in the end. Those pieces of advice helped me a lot when looking for a polished and shorter version of the animatic.

Maybe a peculiar characteristic of my process while working with Luiza is the format that we write the script. We share an online editable document and we format it as a table. Each line is a scene and there are different rows for visual descriptions, voices and sound effects. That was a format once suggested by a sound designer tutor during our bachelor in animation, called Jalver Machado Bethônico. We realized it is very helpful for simultaneous online editing as the lines do not jump in the document and we can write together in a call and while she changes the dialogues I modify the actions the character is doing in the same scene, for instance.
A direction that perhaps the movie would not have taken and it was brought by Luiza was the idea of two time lines and two narrators. I shared with her that I was struggling to convey the interrupted tale narrative format that I received originally from my great-grandmother. She wrote a few scenes in that way as a suggestion and it felt very natural.

Having Luiza as a second screenwriter was very helpful and crucial for my writing process. Knopf (2017) states there is a scary feeling from allowing other artists to collaborate with the director and then lose power in the decisions. But the creative tension added by Luiza’s contributions enabled me to look more objectively and creatively at the story and develop a healthy distance with what the actual facts are and what the movie needs to be clear. When it comes to directing and producing different authors emphasize the importance of giving up and re-work ideas. (Winder, Dowlatabadi, & Miller-Zarneke, 2011; Knopf, 2017).

Hearing that something is not working and being challenged to improve it in a word by word process made me explore and find better solutions and to be more critical with the work to also help her to do the same with her ideas. Knopf explains that when “rejecting your own ideas and showing a willingness to fail boldly, you can set an example for others.” (2017)

I realized that from the research stage I had established my intentions and choices in a very strong way, so as a director I knew what to disapprove or approve of. I felt comfortable letting people suggest and to share with them my goals and message without losing my original focus but also allowing them to contribute and be creative with the project. Kopf also emphasizes:

“To work in this manner, the director must develop a particular set of skills. Verbal and written communications, script analysis, visual aesthetics, and some knowledge of how each member of the total ensemble works serve as the foundation for collaboration.” (2017)

The communications skills I built in my years working for advertisement. I was managed by incredible leaders and eventually became myself the leader of the animation team and also the leader of the team dedicated to work exclusively with one of their biggest clients. That experience taught me a lot about collaborative creation, team management, organization of materials, track and follow up others work. The material developed by me on the previous semester study was helpful not only to explain and introduce the project to Luiza and the other artists involved in later stages but to guide myself into the structured I planned and intended without fearing getting lost and influenced by others, being capable of recognising and welcoming their own creative insights as we will see next in the visual development work. Encouraged by the positive outcome of this first collaboration, I felt excited to pitch the project to other artists and create a team for Milinda. The next one was storyboard.
3.3 Storyboard for exploration

Once with a considerably reviewed version of the script, it was time to make the rough version of the storyboard. In order to fulfil the end of the fall semester presentation and complete many other stages of the early pre-production, a friend of mine, Arielly Moraes, offered to help me by thumbnailing a few scenes of the script.

I marked very few crucial storytelling moments and we had a few online meetings to discuss my visions for the camera angles on those scenes and what should be shown. She would do some scenes and show me for us to brainstorm and give feedback.

This first version was far from ideal and completed. A few narrative moments were still missing or confused, but it was crucial to feel the different pace that a written script and an image have. According to Katz (1991), storyboards serve two primary functions. Firstly, they enable the director to pre-visualize and refine the ideas that were initially developed during the script phase. Secondly, storyboards act as a valuable tool for effectively communicating these ideas to the entire production team. As discussed earlier in the sessions about the script writing, the animatic version of this board enabled me to more efficiently receive feedback on the story from Re:Anima tutors and invited directors on the workshops we had in Lisbon in the semester after. What was not working, what parts were understandable, how could it be better, how to explore better the visual transitions and animation possibilities, how to frame the camera. That first storyboard and animatic was kept for a while, as I was rewriting the script to implement the new ideas and changes it has been suggested to.

Close to the end of the next semester, in Lisbon, I made a new storyboard, this time all by myself. Of course some scenes from the previous version were still a good reference, but now the script and my ideas were more mature and it asked for a fresh start.

I still made many new version of this new one, mostly editing and reframing scenes, exploring if it could be shorter, have less expository scenes and still convey the narrative. The final version managed to be way shorter and yet maintain a lot of the metaphors and visual ideas developed initially. I will talk more about those findings in the discussion segment.
4.0 Concept and Design: how to build “my family’s Brazil” in the screen

Milinda is a project based on memories from my family and me, however we have close to no photographs from those moments. Whenever I pitch the project, it was a recurrent question if I have the original letters or pictures from Gabiel, my great-grandmother love. As a poor family, photographs were a luxury for us until very recently. From Milinda’s youth only one picture survived, removed from an identification document and in which it is still possible to see the government stamp on the bottom part.

Once I started the research, my grandmother gave me access to all the pictures and paperwork she had from the family. It was a bit over 20 pictures, most of them of Milinda already an elder, from the 1990s. This lack of material is mostly due to how expensive pictures were, but also my family’s context. They moved constantly in search of a better life. Different cities, different states or different houses. Many memories and registers were lost on those exchanges. Other times it would be forces beyond themselves. A few months after I finished the research dossier, while already in Belgium, my great-grandmother house was flooded by the nearby river up to the roof. The currently only copy of the pictures are the digital versions I luckily documented a few months before for this movie.

So concept art was very important to collect and define what our memories were visually. According to Winder, Dowlatabadi, and Miller-Zarneke (2011), in the book "Producing Animation" the director collaborates closely with the producer and a team of talented conceptual artists, orient and shape the creative endeavours to achieve the desired style and level of animation quality. I am my own producer as well, so for the concept art, Pedro Santos,
worked with me to generate the pictures I did not have. We had many meetings and online conversations about my memories and intentions with the movie.

I started collecting visual references. I searched the internet for pictures of furniture, common objects that were iconic and sketched an overall map of what I remembered of the house. I also did a visual historical researched about what kind of clothes were common in the decades the story happens and how the coffee farm probably looked. I then organised that in folders divided by different decades and rooms in a cloud archive that I shared with him.

The process with Pedro was very simple and objective, as the idea of the concept stage was more of a visual brainstorm. There was almost no need to change or modify the illustrations.

For the characters, we started exploring possibilities that would be useful for the movie language and how to transform their facial traits to a less realistic style based on the few pictures we had available. I made a few initial concepts and from there we explored variations.

Based on an earlier version of the script, Young Milinda had an outgoing outfit and another one with a cleaning apron. Also hairstyles variations and a slightly aged version for the hospital scene.

For Elderly Milinda we decided to keep the same haircut Young Milinda had for continuity and better silhouette. The first version had a too squared head, which actually reminds me more of my grandmother, Anna, than her mom, Milinda. So the head was made a longer rectangle and also the body was slimmed as she was very skinny.

Gabriel got a variation with kinder eyes and more farm work clothes.

The same happened with the father’s clothes, but he also got more square shapes, as he will be the though and stubborn character.

The concept art pictures can be found in the Appendix.

In the backgrounds the goal was to have a picture of what the house resembled, since from that I had no pictures. I started to realise that in my mind my grand-mothers house sometimes was a blend of memories. I could not distinguish which detail was from my father’s mother or my mother’s mother. So I interviewed my mom about her own memories and we reviewed the references shared with the team.

As mentioned in the script chapter, the cultural connections among me and the early development team were very important. When we could not find pictures, Pedro, an artist from my home state as well, managed to fill the gap based on our memory descriptions being inspired by his own memories. When my mother and I mentioned the sink tap that was not quite like in the picture found on the internet, he knew exactly what we meant. What shade the refrigerator or the kitchen cabinet had. Or he would have questions to fill in details that were remarkable for him in his grandmother's house. Any details that diverged significantly from reality I mentioned and gave a note to the next stage artists. Many others, although not
real, were welcome because they worked in the story. In this process I felt that “accepting the ideas of collaborators, the director opens the door to new ideas for the current production and acquires new techniques for future productions”. (Knopf, 2017)

After the initial concept, Deise Lino was responsible for the character designer and Débora Mini for the backgrounds. Once the concepts were finished, they started to define the actual visual style of the movie and a very similar process happened regarding the memories with them as well. Deise is from São Paulo, where the story starts and Débora is from my state and a city nearby my hometown, as Pedro and Luiza as well.

So I presented to them the visual style references and ideas I intended. I will discuss a bit of the artistic inspirations here, but some the picture references about Brazil can be found in the Appendix session. They also had access to all the material and interviews available. I wanted to bring to the movie their personal visual style of a more cartoony and geometry stylised shapes to represent Brazil.

In the *Castaway* (2021) I do not like the hair and the doll likeness of the character but I do like the background style.

![Figure 9. Castaway [online video]. ESMA Movies, 4 March 2021](image)

*Inner Workings* is a Disney short and has very realistic hair and some more realistic renderings that I do not like, but I think the character design is interesting.

![Figure 10. Inner Workings [online video]. Jorge Tenorio, 22 May 2020](image)
This one has a very beautiful rendering, with a lot of texture and 2D final result that I like more that inspired me to look for paint shaders.

![Figure 11. Je Suis Un Caillou](online video), CGMeetup, 13 November 2021

*The other me* also have a very interesting shade and rendering. It is not exactly a 2D look, but is less realistic. I like the hair and the clothes, although the character design eye style is not very appealing to me.

![Figure 12. The Other Me](online video), ESMA Movies, 05 August 2021

My last reference is *Tamo Junto* (2021). I love the familiarity it was able to achieve with the backgrounds and the overall design. I can definitely recognize the Brazilian scenario in the story.
I love the style of everything being a little bit crocked. The leaves are on the floor. The dirty concrete and texture in the walls. The architecture, the plants, windows and doors, every detail evokes memories.

They felt very inspired by those as well and we agreed to represent our culture in the details as much as possible and the idea for two different shaders to represent present as plasticine clay and past as watercolour. I will break down the meaning of those in the discussion session.

I invited them to bring their own childhood memories to the visuals and details that reminded them or their grandmothers as suggestions, as a way of enriching the movie with a even more relatable experience. They also were responsible for defining the colour palette of the movie.

All the characters and background’s designs can be found in the Appendix.
In the character design we decided to explore round shapes for the past and hopeful characters Gabiel, Young Milinda and Sarinha. In contrast, for Elderly Milinda and the Father we have more squared shapes to represent their bitter personality.

The backgrounds for the early 2000’s have very round edges, to suit better with the clay shader. For the past and the watercolour look we choose to keep more empty spaces to allow the white paper common in watercolour illustrations.

Once the first designs were finished I started the next stage of the production, inside Blender.
5.0 Modelling, Rigging and the challenge of directing other artists

As the visual concept of the movie was being established, I started modelling the backgrounds. The final results for the background can be seen in the Appendix. I modelled and made the look development of them in Blender. Pedro Santos, the concept artist, helped me with the initial colour placement and some textures and I reworked the materials for the render engine and lights.

However, considering the deadline for the schedule it became clear I would not have time to execute the modelling and rigging of the characters. The five backgrounds would already take a considerable time to be finished and I decided to look for an artist for the characters.

So far the artists I was directing were working on skills I have at a moderate level. As Knopft (2017) it is not realist that a “director knows the best way to achieve every detail within this world.” The concept and design takes me a long time to achieve good results, so the easiest approach was explaining my intentions for them to execute and make corrections.

But the modelling brought a new challenge. As this is a skill I am quite confident seeing the first version far from what I have envisioned and defined with the character design was very challenging.

I was working with Iza Maria, the first an artist I did not have a previous connection with. I made a post pitching about the project in a group for 3D professionals and explained I was looking for an 3D modelling and rigging artist. She was interested and sent me her portfolio. We had a meeting for her to get to know better the project, my budget and the schedule. We negotiated that I would be responsible for the Look development of the characters and we managed to agree on a price, since it would also be a learning opportunity for her. This was a common negotiation with the artists. As Winder, Dowlatabadi, and Miller-Zarneke (2011) advises, starting artist might be willing to negotiate prices depending on your project.

The first character to be modelled was Young Milinda and as is possible to see from the amount of notes in the next image, I found this first version very different from the established character design. It was a moment to learn to handle my own frustration with not being able to do everything by myself and therefore assuming control of every detail, organising my thoughts to feedback in a comprehensive way for the artist and respecting changes she was suggesting.
In order to handle situations like this, Knopf (2017) consider important a few abilities in a director: balancing idealism and pragmatism to understand sometimes it is not possible to execute things as they were imagined, respect others to both talk to people respectfully and to honestly listening and take into consideration others’ ideas. Initially, struggled to convince myself my role was to communicate the diverging points and allow Iza to experiment, learn and ultimately, work her way into the assignment. But we made it. Both of us managed to communicate our ideas and to work together in the characters. Her as the responsible artist, me as the decision maker and guidance feedback director I should be.

This was the final model for Young Milinda. There are a few differences from the character design. Some came from suggestions she made and believed would suit better the story and background style I was creating, some other were from work optimisation and schedule focus. And a few other from her own modelling style that I saw in her portfolio and welcomed into the production.
The hard work was also rewarding. For each new character fewer notes were necessary and that made the modelling process smoother for all of us.

Then we started the rigging stage and that proved to be the biggest challenge of the production. Iza was used to rig character for still poses, and the rig would not work for animation. The scheduled was already delayed as the first character took a lot of time to be modelled and the rig took her also a very long time to finish, and it was not animatable. What to do when things go wrong?

I was wishing for the ideal teamwork. As Knopf (2017) says directors often desire a smooth creative process, but in reality, it is rare for everything to go perfectly as planned. It was a feedback situation. I recorded videos demonstrating with other rigs and explaining thoroughly how each control should work, which controls worked together, which ones should not move with others, how they should behave and provided those examples rigs for her to analyse. Virgilio Vasconcelos, my thesis advisor, helped us with many of these technicalities and also providing his book about Blender, that had the answers for many of the questions we raised.

This process impacted greatly the schedule. I felt divided into changing the story, trying to remove characters or scenes, how to adapt the movie to the new circumstances? Winder, Dowlatabadi, and Miller-Zarneke (2011) talk about this kind of situations:

It falls on the producer's shoulders to pace development appropriately, allowing creativity to thrive and at the same time meeting long-term objectives. Although it is essential to adhere to schedules in production, applying strict deadlines to development can at times hinder the creative process. The producer has the balancing act of ensuring that the creative team has enough time and money to achieve their artistic goals and that the quality of artwork generated is suitable for production. As a result, the producer has to use his or her intuition to know when to push and when not to push.
As a director I was also doing what they attribute to the producer job. I did not want to harm the final result with pushing too far for a quick deliver. I looked for the best way to try to accommodate this learning space she needed. I had to rearrange how animations and rendering would start and overlap with the modelling and rigging stage and it became clear I would need more than the two animators I initially planned, as I would not be able to animate as much as I wished, since I would be managing and balancing all this simultaneous work. I also talked to the sound design team to communicate the rearrangement to them and ask how late our delivers could be for them.

As Knopf (2017) explained the dependability we build up to that point by being committed and presenting the work and progress to each one made the team trust my skills to evaluate and decide the best approach for this case. It worked, everyone accommodate the new reality and eventually we started animating.
6.0 Managing an Animation Team: when Follow Through and Overlapping Action are more than Movement Principles

As I explained in the previous chapter, the modelling and rigging stage had a great delay and to be able to meet the final deadline it would be necessary to have a bigger animation team and start animation as some of the rigs were being finished.

Once again, I published an open call for animators. My previous contact network was crucial for this by having access to professional group channels and having friends recommending me animators and recommending me to them. I formed a team of seven animators, one of them being a 2D animator and the rest 3D. Many of them were not familiar with Blender so I recorded video tutorials for them, teaching the software and resources that were helpful to track arcs, constrains for the character to handle objects and how to animate with the rig.

I organized the scenes and the work division using a platform called Trello. Each scene was a board in and they were divided in different sessions according to the stage of the production they were.

![Trello setup for Milinda.](image)

Pre-production meant where the scenes were just listed to be worked. Make the layout meant I would set the camera, place the characters in the background with the correct proportions and the initial pose with the props already set and constrained to the character, if
needed. Low Priority was a session for scenes that were simpler to be executed and would not require flexibility in their duration so I could prioritize scenes that could have an impact for the sound lock version deadline agreed with the sound designers. Ready for animation were scenes that finished the Layout and on production, feedback, fix and approved are self-explanatory sessions.

My biggest challenge with this stage was multitasking. I had a lot of responsibilities just with the animation team. Every morning was mostly dedicated to feedbacks. I would watch their deliveries, record videos for feedback on the animation, make tutorials for technical questions and then prepare more scenes for them to animate once they finished the previous ones.

![Figure 18. I used the online platform Syncsketch for the reviews and would record myself while doing do with OBS Studio software.](image)

I also had a board with the tasks and notes for who was going what, so I could track easily the team current position.
We started with easier scenes and as the animators got used to Blender and the rigs we moved on to more complex actions and eventually we finished for the sound design team polish and synchronize their work.
7.0 Working with a Sound Team

This would be my first time working with a sound team. The previous projects I worked on the sound was directed by someone else.

I met Leo Lindgren, the project Sound Designer, in Aalto’s film school. He gathered a few other artists for his team.

Tuula formed a partnership with Matti Strahlendorff from the Sibelius-Akatemia and me and other Aalto animation directors pitched our project to them and so Helka Marjamäki joined as the composer.

We had a few classes by Matti and Toni Ilo about sound design and how to communicate with the sound artists.

Mostly, it became clear that sharing some of my artistic choices in the movie visual and narrative might be enlightening for them about what decisions and emotions they could aim to convey with sound and music. The idea was for them to know where I was coming from and what my compass was so they could find ways to be creative and communicate it in their own medium while still following the same path I had in mind.

It was in that way that Leo brought Brazilian birds into the background, to Gabriel’s whistle and made decisions like metallic sounds for the papers falling due to a hearth broken by chains.

For Helka there was a special challenge. This story is deeply rooted in Brazilian culture and it was not different for music. I created playlists of the Brazilian music style called Sertanejo, that is very present in my region and typical in the country side of Brazil. Sertanejo is stronger in my memories with my great grandmother and grandma, because they both sang. Their other siblings play guitar and they all used to sing together when I was little. It often talks about the country side life and nature or broken hearts and lost loves.

Also, Samba and Bossa Nova, the music style that was famous in the 1930’s and sometimes played in my family’s house in the early 2000’s. Samba is a music style that was forbidden in Brazil for a while, because of its African heritage. Its lyrics are often rebellious and protests or about the sourness of life. But also, about love and everyday life. I think it is the one with more typical instruments from Brazil.

I did not want to limit her creativity. So I described what sounded typical for me in the style to help her understand better what sounded remarkable for me in those songs. I wanted her to be inspired by them but also feel free to explore and suggest what made sense to her.

We agreed in moments the presence of the influence should be more obvious, but overall we focused in the emotions and narrative function of the sound in the movie. We would have sketch versions for the animatic updates and them discuss if the emotions were well
placed, how could we explore different solutions, what were the character thoughts on those scenes or how early we should foreshadow the next scene.

I perceived their process being more experimental and intuitive then mine. In fact, I later asked about their workflow and all of them told me they like to play and think about what they like or not. So as Knopf advises, in order to achieve the result we got, I adjusted my approach to theirs (2017). I let them try and present the different versions and always focused on talking about feelings and emotions of the narrative with them.

As the animation delayed, we defined a date to have a picture lock delivery, meaning I would not change the duration of any scene anymore so they could advance with their work while I finished more expository scenes that could be measured precisely with the animatic. The voice overs were also very influential for this delivery and that is the topic of the next session.
8.0 Directing a voice actress

At the end of my bachelors, I wrote my final thesis about acting for animators. I was already interested in character animation and wanted to learn more about the topic. However, I am not an actress.

While in Aalto in 2023, I participated in a acting workshop with Mirkka Maarajärvi and it was very enlightening. She taught about processes and methods actors use to build a character psychologically and physically. From my previous study I could find in common points and how to apply it for animation. She also talked about directing actors, what do you inform them about the character intentions, emotions, subtext and how that can bring very different results.

As Ed Hooks (2003) defines seven basic concepts for acting being thinking and feeling, observation, imagination, physicalization, emotional memory, subtext and adaptation. I studied them before and it is not relevant for not to discuss them further, however in Mirkka classes I understood how to communicate them to the animators, the actresses and that was very was crucial for the voice over.

The sound designer Leo Lindgren recorded my voice over and I applied techniques I learned with her to sound more natural and comfortable.

I had investigated previously about the personality of Milinda in a scene study I developed in the first semester, in Luca. The idea was a scene about Milinda finding the first letter. Gabriell used to throw the letters with candy attached to them.

Scene Idea:

Milinda is tidying up her room, she sees a candy falling on the floor, being thrown by the window. She takes it and sees there is a note with it.

She rotates the paper as she does not know what to do with it. Looks at the candy, happily sighs and she unwraps the candy and eats it.

It is very common as a part of my process of animating in 3D to record references of myself acting the scene. It helps me to have ideas for facial acting and small gestures and behaviours I don't always think about otherwise. As I did, I started to understand better looking around before checking what was that thing. Giving time to see the candy, among some other small details and things I understand better while I am acting out for reference.

From there I felt I was understanding better who Milinda was and I wrote a brief description about her. This is an exercise also suggested by Hooks (2003).
Milinda - Character study

She is a shy and insecure young lady, very delicate and vulnerable. Her mom died when she was little and she was raised by an older sister from a previous marriage of her father that was not good to demonstrate affection.

Submissive and passive, she complies with what others expect from her, especially her father and family. She would never do anything that could harm the image that society has of the honour of her family and prejudiced their future.

This secret romance is the only disruptive behaviour she is having as a teenager. It makes her happy and dreamy about the world.

Once I had a clear idea of Milinda, I started the meetings with the actress for Milinda, Lali Santoro. She lives in Brazil and is from the same region my great-grandmother was, the countryside of São Paulo. We had many calls and a few study sessions with the script. I sent her recordings from my grandmother Anna, Milinda’s daughter, since they talk in a similar way and Milinda is longed deceased. She looked for the right tone and how to make the voice sound older.

I would direct her about Milinda’s feelings and thoughts and she would record versions, I would edit in the animatic and show to her for us to discuss what I felt like it was working or not and she explored other versions.

Once we finished the recording, I edited the animatic to adapt the scenes for the new timing of the speech pace and send it to the sound designer.

From there I was focused in render and editing the movie together to achieve the final result. In the next chapter I will discuss my findings and results with this project.
9.0 Discussion

Initially, I deliberated on whether to present this story in the form of a documentary or as a fictional narrative. I made a study during the semester in Lusófona about the possibility of a documentary based on a memory. While the animation draws from a true story, it is also derived from decades-old memories that are prone to distortion, resulting in varying versions among my family members.

On a good perspective, this ambiguity provided an opportunity for narrative choices and introduced the possibility of incorporating elements of fiction into the film, considering the inherent challenges of capturing absolute facts and history. As the director and scriptwriter, I occasionally made decisions to prioritize or adapt certain events to enhance objectivity or better convey the message that I believed to be at the heart of the story. This led me to contemplate the extent to which a documentary can accurately portray the truth of events and depict reality, and how much fictional elements can coexist within a documentary framework.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha, an artist known for her thought-provoking exploration of the documentary genre, delves into the very definition of documentary and its relevance. In Documentary Is/Not a Name, published in 1990, she dares to challenge the established boundaries of the genre. Even in a more recent interview with Erika Balsom from the Frieze in 2018, Minh-Ha continues to advocate for the frequent merging of documentary and fiction. She perceives them as “interacting movements” (Balsom, 2018). According to Minh-Ha, when information flows from the external world to the inner realm, it can be considered a documentary. Conversely, when a story originates from within the author and seeks connection with others, it ventures into the realm of fiction. (2018) These intriguing definitions resonate deeply with Milinda, as both perspectives hold validity when analysing the film. It becomes a captivating interplay between external impact and internal perception, aiming to forge connections with others. Minh-Ha’s argument dismantles the notion of a clear-cut division between fiction and non-fiction within the realm of documentaries:

I wrote ‘there is no such thing as documentary’ because it’s illusory to take the real and reality for granted and to think that a neutral language exists, even though we often strive for such neutrality in our scholarly work. To use an image is to enter fiction. (Balsom, 2018).

Minh-Ha emphasizes the significance of recognizing the director’s role within this context. She cautions against viewing directors as impartial figures or infallible providers of information. Instead, she advocates for an approach that allows room for both the subjects depicted in the film and the audience to draw their own conclusions. By challenging the notion
of directorial neutrality, Minh-Ha encourages a more nuanced and inclusive perspective that invites active engagement and interpretation from all parties involved.

The research into Brazilian history to tell the family story allowed me to realise the importance of visually portraying my country’s aesthetics in the movie to create a sense of identification and understanding with the audience. Doing so not only fosters identification and understanding among the audience but also generates a sense of immersion and reflection. Although similar stories might occur elsewhere, it is essential for me to impact my home country and the generations that from the visual cues become aware of how recently these events took place. The empathy felt by the audience, such as that inspired by the resemblance of my grandmother’s house with their own memories, evokes that it could also be their great-grandmother’s life story.

A movie that caused that effect on me was *Tamo junto* (2021), directed by Pedro Conti. The short tells the story of two neighbours during the covid-2019 pandemic in Brazil. The young Dinho helps Dona Edi, his elderly friend, keep her social distance by doing groceries for her.

The director, Pedro Conti, is a Brazilian artist from São Paulo. He is a specialist in character development, lighting and rendering. (Conti, 2021)

Locating the story was an important point for the director and artists involved in the production. (2021) There is a constant evocation of Jaçanã references and visual representations about the neighbourhood, even in the closing credits song. Beyond the dialogues in Brazilian Portuguese, it is possible to see multiple graffiti in Portuguese throughout the movie. It is also possible to read street signs.

![Figure 20. The objects were pushed into crooked angles as a style choice. This is not a perfect place, not clean, perhaps not beautiful. Nevertheless, in its own way, it is in balance.](image-url)
The fabrication, artistic choices of design and concept for the short environment are very appealing from the first background we see in the short and heavily inspired me. In Milinda I also dedicated myself to build backgrounds full of details and objects remarkable in my family and my artists team memories of our grandmothers houses.

![Kitchen background from Milinda.](image)

Photographs that were used as visual reference for the background can be found in the Appendix.

As Conti (2021) explains that they decided to push the shapes to give them a subtle stylisation, I also made the objects rounder to fit better the plasticine clay material.

![Farm room from Milinda.](image)

The same concept was used in the watercolour backgrounds, however keeping in mind it is part of the technique style to leave empty spaces, so the background was less filled with props.
The two different visual treatments are representing the duality and contrast in the story. That comes for me as a way of communicating the racism and the betrayal.

In the movie there are choices to show contrast between happiness and sadness, the vibrancy of the colors, using the color from the past very washed out to suggest those images are not very sharp or reliable as a precise portrayal of the facts. There is also a layer of meaning in impact water has in this different materials. While clay is impermeable, watercolours dissolve and are erased with water.

While Young Milinda and Gabriel melt the image with their emotions in the watercolour treatment, on the clay world betrayed Elderly Milinda’s emotions are suppressed.

![Figure 23. Gabrielle crying in Milinda.](image1)

![Figure 24. Elderly Milinda crying in Milinda.](image2)

There is a last meaning I attribute to them. The watercolour world is fragile and romanticized, meanwhile the clay universe is realistic and the characters have moving fingerprints texture affecting them.
During the betrayal scene, when the Father lies to Milinda, she is engulfed with chains and comes out of it on the clay treatment. She became someone manipulated and fated to live a new reality. The chains were originally Gabiel words, that were transformed by her Father lies and leave his mouth towards Milinda.

Figure 25. Milinda being engulfed by chains.

Another information I looked for a visual solution was the representation of my great-grandmother illiteracy.

Figure 26. What Milinda understood from the letters.

The solution I found was transforming the letters into figures of her an Gabiel. Whenever the written text is being read by Milinda, the letters are shown missing parts, illegible. When it is the Father reading we can read it normally.

There many other visual metaphors I constructed in the story, as the use of framings rich in concentration in the film served as a mean to communicate aspects of my grandmother's (Milinda’s daughter) personality, the vibrant Brazilian culture, and streamline the storytelling process by visually presenting certain information's on screen. The choice of
colours for the characters, the presence exits as doors or windows in the framing representing possibilities, choices and freedom.

Figure 27. 2000’s Bedroom from Milinda.

As the story became stronger in me and I understood it more as a documentary, it became more comfortable to insert myself in the movie. Not only as a character, but affect the narrative with my opinions, to look for this solutions. In his Introduction to documentary, Bill Nichols delineates six primary categories of documentaries, emphasizing their potential for intertwine. (2001) Within these classifications, Milinda can be seen a fusion of two distinct modes: participatory and reflexive. According to Nichols:

- **Participatory Mode**: emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues. (...)
- **Reflexive Mode**: calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking. Increases our awareness of the constructedness of the film’s representation of reality. (2001)

From the beginning, my connection with the main character is very clear and I continue to guide the story with my perspective, either with the voice over or the creative use of visual language.

On the journey to make this movie this was one of my biggest lesson. In the beginning I was holding myself and the story back scared of how would I technically solve the challenges I might create. Once I assumed I that if i could not I would find something else, I started shaping the story more freely and allowed it to go to challenging places.

And when I found situations like the Denoising boiling effect in the render I reflected upon weather it was a problem or a discovery. Denoising is a process during render in 3D. As it is possible to see below, the image is generated with a noise, the multiples black dots. The
software usually renders multiple samples to gather information and make a final version without the noise.

![Render before and after Denoising.](image)

Figure 28. Render before and after Denoising.

The first render I made of the clay scenes had a boiling effect on them because every frame had a final result slightly different, so combining the image sequence, the image was vibrating. For the backgrounds it was too much, but I could render them separately. For the character, I liked.

Later, Virgilio helped me find the setup configuration that I should change to solve this, but I decided to keep the effect on the movie. After all this project I learned to listen to ideas and to reflect weather they make sense for the project or not. Even from Blender, my unexpected collaborator. Knopf (2017) argues that collaborative directing improve the “capacity for growth as a director, for embracing the knowledge and differing aesthetics of your collaborators will influence you and your future productions greatly”. And as he says later in the text: the final decision is mine (2017). I can afford to try and welcome suggestions.

In many aspects learned Blender and 3D beyond my expectations. I wished I could have learned to model and rig the characters myself better, but if I started this movie feeling I did not know how to make a 3D short, I ended feeling prepared for the next one.

Team management was something I was not expecting to learn. I thought this would be a solo project. As the project grew and the importance of this film took shape I was very fortunate to build this community team with so many artists that connected with the movie and were willing to dedicate their work for the production. All of the artists involved were volunteers, either fully or partially, as a academic project I had not enough budget to cover the actual cost of their work. In return I dedicated myself to bring the best outcome I could push with my capabilities and to organize and manage this production in the best way I could think of. Contributing with their growth with my feedbacks, to respect their insights, their different creative processes and solutions, to motivate them and introduce them to each other. Sharing with them my process and my ideas so they could understand better what direction I was going towards and be able to suggest efficient different routes. Animation is a team work. It is a
collaborative art form. I believe doing the project as it was done, with every single person involved was the best decision I could have made.

And that is not due to the amount of work it could be executed in the timeframe, it is of course one of the reasons I reached for them. But mostly it was due to their questions, their suggestions, our limitations, our learnings and our overcomes. The contributions.

The collective achieved a better result than I would ever be capable of as an individual.
10.0 Conclusion

When you start to make a project alone: do not. Creativity can be a less confusing path if you invite others to follow along with you. I do not mean individual projects cannot be made. Some projects require a more introspective and intuitive process. It does not mean done alone. I learned further to present my idea for feedback, for insights and criticism and how to absorb that and polish it. As the director I have the power decide what is helpful or should be ignored, but usually this will make your project improve and grow in the right direction.

I started this movie not sure of how to write this script, how to direct this in the screen, how to go through every single stage of an animation pipeline and how to execute many technical aspects of it by myself. I had only faith and courage that I could do it. And I overcame all of those doubts. I found inspirations and learned from other directors, I learned how to organize a story and transform it into a film narrative, I learned how to team manage beyond all the previous experience I had and to contribute and welcome the most different type of artists this art form requires. In this thesis I opened my trajectory throw those phases and how I grew with each of them.

The organization of the project was also something I believe was relevant for my learning. Having every single decision and material placed online in tools like Trello or Synchsketch or in cloud back-ups easily accessible to the team members they were relevant for made the project flow smoothly.

One of the hardest moments of the project was when the first version of the Rig for Young Milinda was not animatable. Learning how to manage and solve that problem ensured me how much I grew as an artist, as a director and person in this two years of research.

Another outcome was the search for creative visual solutions for the story. Beyond the challenge of exploring the possibilities of the animation medium, it pushed to be brave and dare committing to solutions I did not know how to execute at the time. That courage prepared me to many other moments I lived in this master.

The aspect I plan to further develop in future projects and research is the representation of Brazil in the audio visual productions. In this thesis I investigated how I coil convey Brazil in my movie, but I am still curious about what could be understood as a Brazilian style of animation, if such aesthetics exist, what are our influences and how much of them come from other markets dominance.

However, ultimately, I believe my biggest lesson during this movie was to build and work a team. Milinda is a story about being left alone. About not being able to trust others and not being capable to discover the truth by yourself. She told this story repeatedly her whole life. It transformed her. I understood the lesson. I not only learned to pursue knowledge and
education, but I listened and absorbed the most precious message Milinda could taught me: when facing a big challenge do not go alone, invite your friends to go with you. It will be better than you could ever expect to be otherwise.
References


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Appendix

Mind Maps

She was an illiterate woman
- Her father would say only men needed education.

1917 - 2008
- Her husband was born in 1916 - 1933

Close to when he confessed her the truth about the letter
form was close by between Guarantã and jins / SP (31km) in a place called Copelândia

- Where the story happens

Around 1930/1932
- She got married in 1934

16/17 years old

6 She had 9 children. My
Grandma is the oldest (a after my grandma was born died, a
- girl that died with 3 months and a boy with 3 year.)

So this was a older relationship which reflected in her shy,
- exterior and submissive personality when young.

Milinda, my grandma, sometimes she would think about running away
with Guido but she would never have the
- courage and bring this dishonor to the family.

She would be stoned by her father.

The Portuguese and Italian families were already very close.
They had other marriages among themselves, that is another reason
why her father desired to marriage.

She made sure all of her kids went to school. As a poor family, they mainly
had the basic education. At that time there was no basic education to adults in Brazil, my
- grandma, was the one who later taught her mother to count and sign her own name.

I remember her saying she didn’t know how to understand those drawings (the letters)
but being very happy for seeing us learning when kids.

Figure A
My grandma, Anna, recalls her mom with heavy eyes when she talked about him. I honestly don’t remember her better.

Most likely his name was Gabriel, but my great-grand called him Gabriel.

He would pass by her window in a horse, when he knew her father wasn’t home, and throw love letters to her window wrapped in roses or candy.

And she would take them to her friend to him read it to her.

This would be the one who later became her husband, Eugenio.

This is another divergent point. My grandma is not sure of how and when this happened. She mix a bit the time line here.

She does not remember when he sent her the letter asking if she was still single and that it was misread to her differently from the rest of my family.

He would still send her letters, but at some point she was already engaged to her father’s loving sister.

He never got married.

This is my cousin Andrea and her husband Ricardo. Another fan fact: she is the one who resembles more my great-grandma.

And that is why it was a surprise for us he being black, we assumed he was white for context.

Took us decades to discover that. It was only when my cousin introduced her then boyfriend that my Great grandmother said that he was the pretiest because he looked just like Gabriel, even the skin tone!

(I was 13/14 at the time)
She would make colourful sweet popcorn to us, using instantaneous juice powder. It was her way of showing affection to us. God knows how difficult it was to wash the pan quickly, especially the way she used to make it.

She cared very much about the way she looked. Always would pair her hair, paint her nails (in a very specific shade of pink) and wear dresses in the same shade and twice a day too many showers a day, at least 3 or 4.

She made breads. Italian breads, they were as big as babies and sugar soft; also fresh pasta.

She had a cousin. I never met it because it was from the time she lived in Dubai, and I in Munich. She loved him, talked about him a lot and he would also curse like her.

Figure C
Concept Art

By Pedro Santos

Figure D. Young Milinda’s Concepts

Figure E. Elderly Milinda’s Concepts
Figure F. Concept art for Gabiel

Figure G. Concept art for the Father
Figure H. Concept art for Kitchen

Figure I. Concept for living room, a background that actually was removed in later versions of the script
Figure J. Concept art for Bedroom

Figure K. Concept art for the Farm exterior
Figure L. Concept art for the Farm Interior
Mood Board Early 2000’s

Figure M.
Mood Board 1930's

Figure O.
Character Design

By Deise Lino

Figure P. All characters line up and heights

Figure Q. Elderly Milinda character design
Figure R. Young Milinda character design

Figure S. Sarinha character design

Figure T. Father character design
Figure U. Father's hands design. It is written in Portuguese square hand and round hands.

Figure V. Gabiel character design
Figure X. Character colours

Figure Y. Early 2000’s colour palette
Background Design

By Débora Mini

Figure W. Kitchen 2000’s Background Design

Figure Z. Bedroom 2000’s Background Design
Figure A1. Hospital 2000’s Background Design

Figure A2. Past Bedroom Background Design

Figure A3. Past Farm exterior Background Design
Final Backgrounds

By Sarah Aimé do Carmo

Figure A4. Kitchen 2000’s

Figure A5. Bedroom 2000’S

Figure A6. Hospital detail 1
Figure A7. Farm Bedroom